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SPIRIT FRESCO PAINTING.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE PROCESS

BY

T. GAMBIER PARRY.



LONDON:

1880.



SPIRIT FRESCO PAINTING.

Highnam Court, Gloucester,
March 30, 1880.

SIR,



IN reply to your letter of the 10th of this month, inquiring about Spirit Fresco Painting, and expressing your desire that I should furnish the Department with a complete account of it, I beg to address to you the following description.

Spirit Fresco Painting is not the mere addition of one more medium to the many already known, but a system, complete from the first preparation of a wall to the last touch of the artist.

The advantages which it ventures to offer are—(1) durability (the principal materials being all but imperishable); (2) power to resist external damp and changes of temperature; (3) luminous effect; (4) a dead surface; (5) freedom from all chemical action on colours.

It is designed mainly for purposes of great works on walls, and to afford to monumental art in this country the advantages peculiar to the various systems of Buon Fresco, tempera, oil, the true encaustic, and water glass, with freedom from those objections to them which are due to the dampness and darkness of our climate.

I am the more glad of the opportunity of sending you a full explanation of the system, because its manifest advantages in rapid drying and dead surface have led to the production of works of considerable importance, which though professedly in Spirit Fresco, have been executed with the commercial consideration of time and cost; these depending on superficial effect, and being liable to perish from want of consistency, might bring the system into disrepute.

THE WALL SURFACE.



THE surface to be painted must be perfectly dry and porous. The best is good common stucco, precisely the same as that always used for Buon Fresco, viz., two parts of thoroughly slaked lime and three of perfectly washed gritty sand. For a great work this might be purposely prepared; but for ordinary work the common plaster (stucco), in the interior of buildings carefully executed, may be trusted. The one primary necessity is that it should be left with its natural surface, its porous quality being absolutely essential. All smoothing process or "floating" destroys this quality. All cements must be avoided, some of them having too hard and smooth a surface, and consequently being devoid of all key or means of attachment for colours, and others being liable to efflorescence and chemical action. The next best surface, after that of stucco on a wall of good dry brick, is that of coarse and porous Bath stone, or any other free stone with that essential quality; all sand-papering or other process being objectionable from its filling the pores of the stone with powder.

THE MEDIUM AND PREPARATION OF COLOURS.



TAKE, in any multiple of these proportions, according to the quantity required for a work:—

Elemi resin (<i>Gum elemi</i>)	-	2 oz.	} weight.
Pure white wax	-	4 oz.	
Oil of spike lavender	-	8 oz.	} liquid measure.
Finest preparation of artists' copal	-	20 oz.	

(If a stronger kind of copal is used 18 ounces are sufficient.)

With these materials, incorporated by heat, all colours, in *dry powder*, must be mixed, and the most convenient system is to do so precisely as oil colours are mixed on a slab, and put into

tubes. The colours keep in this way for many years. I have many in tubes above 20 years old, as fresh as when put there.

The proper method of compounding this medium is this. Two pots, one small, one large, a long spoon, and a charcoal stove are required. Take 2 oz. of Elemi resin, and melt them in 2 ounces of rectified turpentine in the small pot or saucepan over the charcoal, and strain when quite liquid through muslin (to clear it of pieces of leaves and bark) into the larger pot. This is most conveniently of copper. The one I use is 6 inches across and 18 inches high, with a flange near the bottom to make it stand securely on the charcoal. Into this put 4 ozs. of white wax in small pieces, and melt with the Elemi. When melted, add 20 ozs. of copal, and boil all together to a white foam, stirring well with a spoon reaching to the bottom, remove from the fire and boil again. Immediately before the last removal from the fire add 8 oz. of spike oil. This volatile ingredient would be wasted if added sooner and boiled.

N.B.—It is necessary to be extremely careful lest any spark from the charcoal (no flame being allowed) should ignite the liquid, every ingredient being inflammable. It should be done out of doors.

Decant through a funnel into strong *clear glass* bottles, that the condition of the medium may be clearly visible before use, the quart size being the most convenient, and leave uncorked to cool. When used, the bottles may require shaking, not that the materials will ever again disintegrate, but from the weight of the wax they will tend to thicken at the bottom.

PREPARATION OF THE WALL SURFACE.



CHOOSE a time of dry and warm weather.

Dilute the amount of medium required in *once and a half its bulk* of good turpentine. The mixture is more effective if compounded by heat, which is very easily done in a large iron cauldron over charcoal free from flame; and the "Wall Wash" thus made can be kept for any time in large bottles. (If kept in *tins* for any length of time its con-

dition for use would be hidden). With this wash let the surface of the wall be well saturated, the liquid being dashed against it rather than merely washed over it. After two days interval this must be repeated. After a few days left for evaporation, mix equal quantities of pure white lead (in powder) and of gilder's whitening (common whitening being often full of large grits and too strong of lime) in the medium *slightly* diluted with about a third of turpentine, and paint the surface thickly, and when sufficiently evaporated to bear a second coat, add it as thickly as a brush can lay it. This, when dry, for which two or three weeks may be required, produces a perfect surface—so white that colours upon it have all the internal light of Buon Fresco and the transparency of pure water colours—and it is so absorbent that their attachment is complete.

METHOD OF PAINTING.



PAINT boldly and simply as in Buon Fresco; as much as possible *alla prima*, and with much body; and use pure oil of spike in your dipper freely. Decision is very necessary, because by much harassing the surface the materials are liable to be disintegrated, the resins rise to the surface and perfect deadness is lost. If the surface has been left for so long as to have become quite hard, wash over the part for the morning's work with pure spike oil, to melt the surface (hence the name Spirit *Fresco*) and prepare it to incorporate the colours painted *into* it. If any part requires second painting the next day, do *not* wash again with spike oil, it is liable to bring the resins to the surface, but use plenty of spike oil in your dipper, as a water-colour painter uses water. Paint rather solidly than transparently. Transparent glazing is less likely to dry dead than colours used with white lead.

The Rationale of the painting is therefore this, that the colours in powder being incorporated with material identical with that which has already sunk deep into the pores of the wall surface, and has hardened there by the evaporation of the turpentine vehicle, may be regarded as belonging to the mass of the wall itself, and not as mere

superficial applications. This result is produced by the spike oil being the one common solvent of all the materials, which turpentine is not; the moment the painter's brush touches the surface (already softened, *if necessary*, for the day's work) it opens to receive the colours, and on the rapid evaporation of the spike oil it closes them in, and thus the work is done.

IMPORTANT CAUTIONS.



TAKE care that the spike oil or turpentine does not run down, or by any carelessness be sprinkled on any finished work. It produces a shine by bringing up the resins, and is indelible, except by solid over-painting.

Very clean habits are necessary, for every ingredient is so sticky that unless the brushes, palette, &c., &c. are thoroughly cleaned with turpentine at the close of every day's work the result is great discomfort.

Pureness of materials is as absolutely necessary as it is difficult to ensure. The white wax commonly sold by chemists is a base compound of spermaceti, &c., with wax; Brecknell and Turner, Wax Chandlers, Haymarket, prepare pure wax for artists and other purposes. Spike oil is too commonly no more than turpentine with a little lavender put into it. Copal is of all sorts and qualities, from the purest artist's preparation to the strong body copal of coachmakers, which is commonly not copal at all but anime, a hard fossil resin.

Let all preparation of the surface and rubbing up of the colours for tubes be overlooked by the artist, as in old days when the technical work was done in the artist's own "bottega." A thoroughly respectable colourman interested in serving the artist may be trusted, but the colourman's *man* (somewhere else) most certainly is not. The colours dry so rapidly while he is rubbing them up on the slab, that he is tempted to dilute them with turpentine, and thus destroy their power and consistency, which the use of pure medium alone ensures.

RESULT.



ALL this sounds very complicated and troublesome in description, but in practice, when once "*en train*," it is perfectly simple and easy. I do not pretend that it is a cheap method, or free from all trouble, but that trouble is as nothing in comparison with Buon Fresco Painting and several other methods.

If this system is really what, after more than 20 years' work in it, I have confidence that it is, it is worth that little trouble (only felt when first beginning) by any artist who desires to ensure the durability of his work. It is for this that the adoption of the *entire system is absolutely essential*. Mere use of the medium for superficial painting may have beautiful effect, but for *resisting power* and *durability* it is worthless.

With all the many and manifest faults of amateur work, my own paintings executed over the chancel arch of Highnam Church 21 years ago, the procession in the aisle of that church begun above 12 years ago, and the work in St. Andrew's Chapel in Gloucester Cathedral, finished in 1867, simply regarded as tests, afford for all practical purposes of wall painting every quality that a Fresco Painter, under the exigencies of English climate and darkness, can require. I only quote my own works because I know that in them *every condition has been followed*. Their surfaces are hard and smooth. The rapidity of drying prevents any stickiness, and the surface becomes immediately compact, but it requires a year or two at least for its perfect induration by the complete evaporation of the volatile oils.

I have the honour to remain,

Sir,

Yours very faithfully,

To the Secretary,
Science and Art Department,
South Kensington.

T. GAMBIER PARRY.

ANOTHER METHOD.



AS a system of painting for *large works of high class* other than upon walls, where dead surface and durability are desiderata, I venture to add that for large wooden panels or extensive areas of wooden ceilings I have found, after many experiments, the following most pleasant in use and perfectly successful in result.

Take <i>one</i> part, <i>in bulk</i> ,	pale drying oil,
ditto ditto	strong copal varnish,
<i>two</i> ditto	japanner's gold size,
<i>two</i> ditto	turpentine,

have them thoroughly shaken together, and always strongly shaken before use. In this (which, by way of specifying it, I have called the Ely medium) have all dry powder colours rubbed up and put into tubes, or, if quantity is wanted, into pots kept covered against dust and evaporation. Paint according to habit or circumstance, transparently as in water colour or massively as in oil. Use as vehicle in the dipper a compound of three parts turpentine and one part medium. It dries with such rapidity that outline under-painting and final effect may follow immediately on each other. It is very pleasant and easy of use. It dries perfectly dead and hard as iron. Ordinary decorators often use japanner's gold size alone because of its dead surface, but it is useless alone, having no consistency nor any binding power to preserve colours. This Ely medium is exceedingly dark in colour, but it produces no appreciable effect on the powder colours that are rubbed up in it, not even white. If any effect at all, it is that of a slight mellow-ness. With this the whole of the eastern half of the nave roof, the whole lantern and octagon, and the baptistery transept ceiling at Ely Cathedral were painted, the former as long ago as 1863-4.

T. G. P.

Extract from a Letter addressed to the Director of the South Kensington Museum by Sir Frederick Leighton, P.R.A.



I am indeed perplexed to know how to meet your wish in regard to Mr. Gambier Parry's paper on the subject of the medium which we owe to him, and of his mode of using it; for of the former I know nothing but what I have from his lips, and in respect to the latter I can only corroborate from my own experience the advice which he gives. That advice has abundantly sufficed to me, and will be found sufficient, I think, for anyone who wishes to paint in "Spirit Fresco." What can I add? If I say that the work must be done freely, resolutely, and swiftly, I say no more than is true of all forms of mural painting, that is of all forms of art in which *retouching* is either impossible or undesirable, and clearly conceived results have to be rapidly obtained. This, perhaps, may be usefully remarked, that although the resources of Spirit Fresco are exceptionally great, and repainting *may* be carried on almost *ad infinitum*, the qualities obtained by two or more paintings are always purchased at the price of that limpid simplicity and breadth which have so great a charm in wall painting. The painter has, therefore, in every case to satisfy himself that the gain is at least equivalent to or outweighs the loss.

In sum I should say "be lavish of the vehicle, know what you want, and do it quickly."

Faithfully yours,

FRED. LEIGHTON.

8th May 1880.







